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## Knowledge and knowers in online learning : investigating the effects of online flexible learning on student sojourners

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**Knowledge and knowers in online learning:  
Investigating the effects of online flexible learning  
on student sojourners**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree

**Doctor of Philosophy**

from

University of Wollongong

by

**Rainbow Tsai-Hung Chen**

B.Ed., M.A.

Faculty of Education

2010

## **Certification**

I, Rainbow T.-H. Chen, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Rainbow T.-H. Chen

5 May, 2010

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## **Abstract**

This study investigates the effects of online flexible learning on international students in Australian higher education. It brings together two issues widely viewed as key to the future of higher education worldwide: online learning and international students. The focus of this research is on Chinese students because they are presently among the largest international student cohorts in English-speaking countries that have embraced online education, including Australia. The study was motivated by the paucity of empirical research on international students' experiences of online flexible learning, and particularly the lack of research in this area underpinned by theory. The aim of this investigation was to explore Chinese international students' perspectives and experiences of online flexible learning by systemically analysing these learners' educational dispositions, the pedagogic practices involved in this form of learning, and the relations between these two factors. The study seeks to generate findings that contribute to the theorisation of online educational experiences.

The research employed a qualitative case study approach, drawing on postgraduate Chinese students' online experiences in the Faculty of Education at an Australian university. Three key questions guided the research:

- (1) What are the characteristics of the teaching practices that have helped shape the educational beliefs and values that Chinese student sojourners bring to the online learning context in Australia?
- (2) What are the characteristics of the online teaching practices at the Australian university, including the pedagogical beliefs underpinning them?
- (3) How do Chinese students interpret and respond to these online teaching practices?

The research design comprised three main parts that addressed these three questions respectively. These involved conducting: focus groups with Chinese students from various faculties; interviews with Australian teachers of online units in the Faculty of Education, and a review of their unit outlines; and multi-session interviews with individual Chinese students who had previously been or were currently enrolled in an online unit in the Faculty of Education.

The theoretical framework used for the research drew primarily on three principal sources. First, Berry's acculturation approach (1980, 1997a, 2005) provided an organising framework for analytically distinguishing what the 'heritage culture' or dispositions students brought with them from China, the 'host culture' or pedagogic practices they encountered in Australian online courses, and the outcomes of the meeting of these two educational cultures. Secondly, the conceptual framework of Basil Bernstein (1977, 1990, 2000) enabled each of these to be analysed in terms of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. Thirdly, Maton's 'Legitimation Code Theory' (LCT) (Maton, 2000, 2007, 2009; Moore & Maton, 2001) provided a further means of conceptualising their underlying structuring principles in a manner that enabled a systematic analysis.

The instructional approaches used in the online units examined in this research were identified as constructivist-inspired. A major finding of the study was that there was, in the terms of legitimation codes, a 'code clash' between the students' prior 'knowledge code' educational experiences (where explicit procedures, skills and specialised knowledge are emphasised) and the teachers' 'knower code' notions of education (where learners' dispositions are emphasised as the basis of achievement). This code clash in the students' online learning experiences led to 'relativist code' consequences (where neither specialist knowledge nor particular dispositions is emphasised – a kind of vacuum of legitimacy), which were associated with feelings of isolation, guilt and depression. The study argues that online constructivist teaching assumes a particular kind of knower, with particular socially-based dispositions and experiences, and systematically disadvantages other kinds of knowers. The thesis concludes with a detailed theoretical explanation for this form of learning experience, and a discussion of the findings in relation to constructivist teaching practice and online learning.

One contribution of the study is that it expands the knowledge base concerning Chinese learners' experiences with online flexible education. More prominent and enduring contributions of this research, however, reside in the wider application of the findings to other learner populations, and in the demonstrated utility of exploring online educational practice and experience through a sociology of knowledge approach.

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